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Sectarian Violence in Beirut

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The deadliest sectarian violence in Lebanon in over a decade erupted as hundreds of armed Hezbollah and Amal Party supporters marched toward the Palace of Justice in Beirut to call for the removal of a judge leading the investigation into the August 2020 port explosion. Sniper fire from rooftops—allegedly by the Christian Lebanese forces—killed at least six people, forcing demonstrators and journalists to take shelter. The willingness of the terrorist group Hezbollah, Iran's largest proxy, to publicly threaten perhaps the sole remaining functioning Lebanese institution, leaves Lebanon on the brink of either total state failure or complete Hezbollah control. Meanwhile, the sectarian clashes could push Lebanon into a new civil war and Hezbollah into conflict with Israel.

As turmoil within Lebanon continues, the United States should signal its strong support for an independent judiciary, keep a spotlight on the need for full accountability for the August 2020 Beirut port explosion, continue targeting Hezbollah and Lebanon's corrupt political elite with sanctions, and strictly condition any further assistance to Lebanon's imploding economy and Armed Forces on the implementation of essential reforms, including the reduction of Hezbollah's ruinous influence and military hegemony.

What Happened?

- On October 12, Tarek Bitar, the judge leading the investigation into the [August 2020 Beirut explosion](#), [issued an arrest warrant for lawmaker Ali Hassan Khalil](#), a former finance minister and top official in the Shia Amal party, a political ally of the Iranian-proxy Hezbollah.
 - Just a day prior, Hezbollah chief [Hassan Nasrallah accused the judge](#) of politicizing the investigation.
- On October 14, [hundreds of Hezbollah and Amal supporters](#) armed with machine guns and RPGs [took to the streets to further protest the judge's actions](#). Chaos erupted when the protestors were targeted by snipers and gunmen. In addition, four B7 rockets were fired into the air.

- While Hezbollah and Amal blamed the right-wing Christian Lebanese Forces for the sniper fire, they [denied the accusations](#).
- [Six people were killed](#) and more than thirty people were wounded.
- The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) [arrested nine individuals](#) in connection with the attack in Beirut, including one who confessed to planning the attack.
- At a [press briefing on October 14](#), U.S. State Department Spokesperson Ned Price stated, “Judges must be free from violence, they must be free from threats, they must be free from intimidation, including that of Hizballah....we have consistently been clear that Hizballah’s terrorist and illicit activities undermine Lebanon’s security, they undermine Lebanon’s stability, and they undermine Lebanon’s sovereignty.”
 - U.S. Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland announced on October 14 that the United States would provide an [additional \\$67 million support the LAF](#).

Why Is It Important?

- The crisis comes as Lebanon continues to face a devastating economic crisis that its political leadership has been unable or unwilling to resolve. Since 2019, Lebanon’s currency has lost [ninety percent of its value](#). [Gas shortages](#) have created regular power blackouts.
 - This most recent flare-up of violence was preceded by years of unsuccessful mass protests movements and successive failed governments.
- Hezbollah, formed in 1982 following Israel’s invasion during the Lebanese Civil War, has long cast itself as the [champion of resistance](#) against Israeli aggression. Hezbollah has been a key driver of corruption, inefficiency, and degradation of human rights in the Lebanese state.
 - As Iran’s oldest proxy, according to Israeli intelligence estimations, Hezbollah receives [roughly](#) seventy-five percent of its funding from Iran, amounting to around \$800 million per year.
 - Although Hezbollah [only holds twelve seats](#) in Lebanon’s 128-seat parliament (and seventy together with its political allies), it (and by extension Iran) effectively dominates the Lebanese state. The military capabilities of Hezbollah’s military wing have long since [outstripped those of the official LAF](#). Consequently, Hezbollah is effectively able to dictate virtually all strategic decisions of the Lebanese government to strengthen its control and eliminate any challenges to its power.
- Hezbollah’s willingness to publicly threaten perhaps the sole remaining functioning Lebanese institution and the only hope of the Lebanese people to hold their corrupt government accountable—the judicial investigation into the Beirut harbor explosion—makes clear that they will not allow any exercise of political power that they do not control. It thus narrowed Lebanon’s options to either the collapse of the state or accepting its complete cooptation by the terrorist group.
 - In 2005, Hezbollah [assassinated](#) Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and proceeded to violently evade the international tribunal set up to investigate the assassination through threats and murder. A pattern has emerged of using escalation of violence, riots, threats and murders as a way to avoid accountability.

- Meanwhile, the recent deadly clashes create the potential for Lebanon’s state failure to turn into a broader sectarian conflict. If Lebanon’s Sunni or Christian communities seek to protect themselves from a presumed Hezbollah capture of the state, or if Hezbollah seeks to preemptively subjugate these minority groups, Lebanon could easily slip once again into civil war.
 - Lebanon’s perennial ethnic tensions came to a head in the 1975-1990 Lebanese Civil War between the Christian Lebanese Front, the Sunni Lebanese National Movement, and the Shiite populist Amal movement. That conflict resulted in multiple foreign military interventions and the exodus of nearly one million Lebanese people.
- Internal violence and decreasing stability in Lebanon are of particular concern to Israel as it may increase the chance that Hezbollah decides to attack Israel. Similar to the recent Gaza conflict in May, in which Hamas attacked Israel amid increased tensions in Jerusalem and cancelled elections in the West Bank, Hezbollah could view the domestic situation as an opportunity to strike.
 - Public discontent with Hezbollah’s shadow regime has [boiled over in recent years](#), especially in the wake of the August 2020 Beirut explosion. Hezbollah’s popularity has also been diminished by its involvement in Iran’s foreign proxy wars – especially in Syria to prop up the murderous Assad regime – where poor Lebanese Shiite recruits are used as cannon fodder.
 - To deflect from its failures, Hezbollah frequently attempts to instigate minor conflict with Israel, most recently in [August](#) 2021.
- Peace between Hezbollah and Israel is nominally supposed to be maintained by the LAF and the United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL). However, they have failed to fulfill the United Nations Security Council [mandate](#) which demands that peacekeepers assist the LAF in the “the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon, so that...there will be no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than that of the Lebanese State.”
 - UNIFIL lacks enforcement authorities under [Chapter VII on the UN Charter](#) which prevent peacekeepers from confiscating weapons. Instead, peacekeeper authority is limited to reporting to the LAF on suspected caches of arms and other contraband.
 - Under UNIFIL and the LAF’s watch, Hezbollah’s influence over Lebanon and its military capacity has [grown](#) from roughly 13,000 rockets and missiles before the 2006 conflict with Israel to approximately 130,000 today, including increasingly sophisticated precision munitions, anti-ship cruise missiles, drones, and antitank guided munitions.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- Beyond the State Department spokesperson’s previous press conference statements, President Biden and Secretary of State Blinken should publicly issue statements condemning the violence and reinforcing U.S. support for an independent judiciary in Lebanon to investigate the Beirut bombing.
 - The U.S. Embassy in Beirut should accelerate and expand [its efforts to promote](#) an independent judiciary in Lebanon. In April 2021, the Office of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) at the Embassy of the U.S. in Beirut, in collaboration with the American Bar Association (ABA), “concluded a series of training seminars for

members of the Lebanese judicial system focused on efforts to strengthen the country's criminal justice processes." The embassy provided technical training to more than 350 Lebanese judges and prosecutors.

- At the same time, however, the United States needs to determine whether the Lebanese state and military are, or can be, independent from Hezbollah's control.
 - Congress should hold hearings on the recently proposed \$67 million aid package for the LAF to understand what steps the State Department is taking to ensure that American tax dollars do not benefit Hezbollah and what the strategy and actual prospects are for strengthening the LAF as an independent force that can realistically constrain Hezbollah's dominance and influence.
- The Biden administration should adopt a comprehensive strategy for Lebanon in cooperation with America's European partners that seeks to alleviate the humanitarian suffering of Lebanese citizens. It is imperative that all efforts avoid either strengthening Hezbollah or Lebanon's corrupt political elite. Therefore, the United States should condition humanitarian assistance on Beirut taking significant reforms to diminish Hezbollah's political influence and military capacity. Elements of such an approach should:
 - Increase sanctions on Hezbollah and Lebanese politicians who facilitate its hegemonic role.
 - The Sanctioning the Use of Civilians as Defenseless Shields Act (Shields Act), which unanimously passed Congress in 2018, mandates the president to submit a list to Congress of each person who uses civilians as human shields to aid Hezbollah or Hamas and requires sanctions on those individuals;
 - The United States could use the Global Magnitsky Act sanctions to target Hezbollah supporters and corrupt Lebanese political elite, including those responsible for the nation's financial collapse as well as individuals implicated in the Beirut port explosion who are refusing to cooperate with the investigation.
 - Continue to target Hezbollah's [worldwide](#) economic and criminal network;
 - Deliver humanitarian assistance directly to the Lebanese people through vetted channels and organizations not linked to the country's corrupt elite or political parties, including the nearly [\\$100 million in aid](#) that Biden promised in August (the United States has provided an additional \$560 million in humanitarian aid to Lebanon over the past two years);
 - Condition all other forms of U.S. assistance on the Lebanese state taking measurable political, economic, and security-sector reforms, including requiring LAF to fulfill its international obligations to maintain stability on the southern border and halt Hezbollah's weapons and military activities; and
 - Push for European states to fully designate Hezbollah (as opposed to its affiliates) as a terrorist organization and hold the Lebanese government, LAF, and UNIFIL accountable for Hezbollah's actions.

- The LAF has been penetrated by Hezbollah and is now subservient to the terrorist group. Providing the LAF with extra \$67 million without demanding that it undertake actions which serve US interests with regards to weakening Hezbollah and Iran's position entirely fails to hold LAF accountable.
- Israel could clarify its role in the region and its willingness to help the Lebanese people by providing direct energy assistance to Lebanon to solve the latter's energy scarcity as winter approaches. If there remains a Lebanese state, Israel could also accelerate negotiations and agreement on a maritime border arrangement, which would allow Lebanon to drill and produce gas in the future in a defined Lebanon exclusive economic zone (EEZ). This would, however, require strict financial control to ensure the proceeds of Lebanese energy production do not go to strengthen and enrich Hezbollah.
- As JINSA [recommended](#) in its October Iran report, America and its allies must fully enforce existing sanctions against Iran immediately. The Biden administration should recommit to enforcing the sanctions regime, especially against Iran's dramatic increase in oil exports, to ensure the resources and assistance Iran can provide to Hezbollah are as limited as possible.
- If the Lebanese government interferes with or prevents the judiciary from fulfilling its role, the United States should be ready to lead a United Nations Security Council vote of no confidence in the ability of Lebanon's failed and corrupt government to allow the judiciary to perform an independent and credible investigation, and instead authorize establishment of an independent international investigative mission.
- As JINSA has previously [suggested](#), Congress and the Biden administration should [bolster](#) Israeli deterrence in terms of upgrading America's prepositioned weaponry in Israel, WRSA-I, accelerating Israeli procurement of U.S. weapons, and funding Israel's Iron Dome aerial defense system. This will assist in preventing Hezbollah from portraying itself as a resistance organization by instigating conflict with Israel as a mobilization method.

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